

Waterfowl Advisory Committee
Minutes, February 12, 2008
Rembert Dennis Building
Columbia, South Carolina

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chair Sam Hiott, William “Tadpole” Baldwin, Jr., Billy Ray Cato, Lin Fore, Phil Wilkinson, Stephen Thomas, Robin Inabinet, Craig Sasser

MEMBERS ABSENT: Carlyle Blakeney, Jr., Campbell Coxe, Craig LeSchack, Parker Barnes, Jr.

DNR STAFF PRESENT: Breck Carmichael, Buddy Baker, Jamie Rader, Sam Chappellear, Dean Harrigal, Walt Rhodes, Charles Ruth, Lt. Mark Carey, Susan Johnson

Chair Hiott opened the meeting and the minutes of the November 13, 2007 meeting were approved as submitted.

WATERFOWL HUNTING AND MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN REGION III:
Region III Wildlife Coordinator Buddy Baker provided a slide presentation of several waterfowl management areas and public waters in the State. The presentation included photographs reflecting the severity of drought effects on the Santee Cooper Lake system. Drought conditions prevented the Santee Cooper Wildlife Management Area from attracting waterfowl during the season. Baker also stated the exposed lake bed had attracted quite a bit of 4-wheeler activity; however he does not feel there is concern of severe damage from this activity. Regardless, neither the Public Service Authority nor the DNR have any regulations in place that could restrict the use of 4-wheelers on the lake bed.

Hickory Top (a Category II waterfowl management area) was also not able to be flooded during the season as well. Baker stated that this was actually beneficial in this case as green-tree reservoirs need to be dried out approximately every 3 to 4 years for survival of the hard mast producing the trees that provide the food for waterfowl. Baker also noted that waterfowl hunts did not occur on Sandy Beach WMA or the Hatchery WMA due to the drought.

Baker stated one positive result of the drought is germination of various species of herbaceous plants in some areas, resulting in replenishing the seed bank. With slow flooding, these areas will be good habitat for waterfowl, and will be beneficial to the fishery. Baker also stated because of drought conditions, there has been tremendous regeneration of cypress and tupelo in some areas.

Broad River WMA (Category I, Region III) was open for waterfowl hunting and had a successful season due to staff efforts in pumping water into the impoundments from the Broad River. Baker commended the manager of the area, Bob Harkins. Hunting opportunities on Enoree waterfowl management area were not successful due to drought related crop damage. Baker stated Ditch Pond (Category II) waterfowl management area

was added this year but drought conditions prevented its success. Baker stated Crackerneck waterfowl management area hunters and harvest results were down due to the drought. Several successful hunts occurred on Potato Creek waterfowl management area due to the presence of hydrilla.

SC PARTNERS PROGRAM-TEN YEAR REPORT:

Joe Cockrell of the US Fish and Wildlife Service provided a power point presentation of the Partners' efforts over the ten year history of the Program. Cockrell stated participating agencies involved in the Program are Ducks Unlimited, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the DNR. The Program was designed to provide landowners and managers financial incentives and technical assistance to restore, improve, and maintain existing managed tidal wetlands, primarily through the replacement of deteriorated and nonfunctional rice trunk water control structures. Priority projects typically are in close proximity to State Wildlife Management Areas, National Wildlife Refuges and other managed wetlands and protected areas.

Cockrell further stated since the beginning of the Program, improvements have been made on a total of 6,488 acres which includes 53 different projects. Additionally, a total of 68 trunks have been replaced, benefiting waterfowl, wading birds, shorebirds, raptors, and passerine birds, including imperiled species. Other work includes spillway boxes, ditch clean-out, dike repairs, trunk repairs and prescribed burning. The average restoration cost per acre is \$132.

WMA WATERFOWL HUNT RESULTS FOR 2007-2008:

Wildlife Biologist Dean Harrigal stated the total season bag was 3,257 birds with 1,467 hunters participating for an average of 2.2 ducks per hunter. Santee Coastal Reserve led with both hunter opportunity and harvest. Harrigal further stated the harvest was down from last year as a result of drought conditions.

Adult/youth hunts produced an average of 3.4 birds per bag, and both the State and Federal youth days resulted in good hunter activity. The harvest for the Federal youth day was 142 birds with 55 hunters participating. The number of shots fired was 917. The harvest for the State youth day was 145 birds with 53 hunters participating. The number of shots fired was 873.

Complete DNR waterfowl management area hunt results can be viewed on the DNR web site (<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/waterfowl/wfresults.html>).

YOUTH WATERFOWL DAY PARTICIPATION:

WFF Deputy Director Breck Carmichael stated due to the interest in comparing the December date to the traditional February days (in terms of participation) for youth waterfowl hunting, the Law Enforcement Division was asked to collect basic information while checking hunt parties on these dates. Carmichael reminded Committee Members the information received was not a standardized sampling. A total of 42 parties with 69 youth hunters were encountered on December 8. The number of parties encountered on

the two February days was 90 with 155 youth, ages ranged from 8 to 15 across both hunt periods. Carmichael further stated on the December date, most hunting parties occurred on public waters while most hunters encountered on the February days occurred on private properties. Due to the drought and unavailability of a standardized sampling technique, Carmichael stated that not much could be concluded from these numbers, but he recommended the youth hunting days (December and February) remain in place another season. The Committee will decide on the dates to be recommended to the DNR Board at the appropriate time.

2008 SC AQUATIC PLANT MANAGEMENT PLAN:

Carmichael distributed copies of a report prepared by Interim DNR Environmental Program Coordinator Bob Perry, detailing aquatic plant management issues on the Santee Cooper lakes (copy attached to the original minutes). Carmichael noted there are no plans to stock grass carp in 2008 in the Santee Cooper system, an issue which has been of interest to the Committee for some time. Carmichael informed the Committee that the 2008 Aquatic Plant Management Plan is now available for public comment and can be accessed through the DNR web site (<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/water/envaff/aquatic/draftplan.html>.) Carmichael encouraged Committee members to review the plan and should they want to provide comments, they could do so on the web site. Carmichael further stated from waterfowl and fishery standpoints, he does not feel there are any issues of concern with the 2008 Plan.

PEER REVIEW TEAM UPDATE:

Chair Hiott stated the Peer Review Team enjoyed their November peer review and assessment of the Yawkey Wildlife Center. Committee Member Wilkinson read the Team's Interim Progress Report. Plans are to finalize the report once all members of the Peer Review Team have a chance to meet and further discuss the summary and other findings of the earlier peer review in greater detail. Once a final report is complete, it will be submitted to the WAC and DNR Board. A copy of the Interim Progress Report is attached to the original minutes.

Wilkinson stated Yawkey Trustees have emergency funds that could possibly be utilized in repairing infrastructure needs. Wilkinson feels the damaged water control structures have reached a classification of emergency. A discussion of the repair needs of the Yawkey Wildlife Management Area followed. Chair Hiott stated the Peer Review Team will delay its review of Bonneau Ferry until a final report of the Team's findings and recommendations of the Yawkey Center review has been submitted to WAC members for review.

DNR LEGISLATIVE REPORT:

Breck Carmichael distributed copies of the DNR Legislative Update (copy attached to the original minutes). Carmichael stated the Alligator Management Program bill (S-452) will most likely be signed by the Governor within the next week. Carmichael stated another DNR endorsed bill of interest is H.4548 which provides for catch/length limits, and other regulations pertaining to Striped Bass in the Santee Cooper River system during specified periods. A new migratory waterfowl permit (House bill 4547) has been introduced by

Rep. Vick. This bill was introduced last year as H.3510 and related to technical changes in the sale of the migratory waterfowl stamp. The House amended the bill to include an increase in the cost of the duck stamp. Governor Sanford vetoed the bill and the General Assembly sustained his veto. The newly introduced bill removes the increase in the duck stamp. Carmichael stated it is extremely important that this bill pass to allow the electronic sale of the state duck stamp.

FUTURE DUCK SEASONS:

Chair Hiott asked that this item be placed on the agenda to provide an opportunity for members to discuss positive/negative comments/opinions encountered during the waterfowl season regarding bag limits, season dates, shooting hours, etc.

Committee member Inabinet inquired about the federal framework for the 2008-2009 season. Dean Harrigal stated he does not anticipate any changes in the Federal season framework, but there could possibly be species-related changes such as for brant or pintails. Committee member Inabinet also asked about the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) taking a step in protecting the resource and placing less emphasis on what duck hunters want (season length). Harrigal stated the FWS manages the resource on a very broad and scientific scale. Harrigal further stated the FWS has the resource in the best interest of all considerations. A discussion followed. Chair Hiott stated it is important for Committee members to discuss input received from friends, fellow hunters, etc. Hiott further stated the Committee selects season dates based on what is acceptable by the FWS and within that framework, but should also be balanced by what is in the best interest of the waterfowl hunting constituency.

OLD BUSINESS:

Chair Hiott inquired about the status of the WAC forum on the DNR web site. Carmichael stated the forum is active and easily accessible. Carmichael further stated it does not appear the forum is producing the Committee's envisioned result in that comments being made by waterfowl hunters are directed to one another rather to WAC members. Additionally, Carmichael announced all DNR Advisory Committee members' names, addresses and telephone numbers had recently been posted on DNR's web site at the request of the DNR Board.

NEW BUSINESS:

DNR Board Chairman Michael McShane stopped by the meeting and thanked members for their participation on the Committee. McShane briefed the Committee on several topics, i.e., effects of the drought on the natural resource and the drought status, future surface water withdrawal permitting, and looming State agency budget cuts.

Chairman McShane addressed the Committee regarding the specialized license tag request by Chairman Hiott for WAC members. McShane stated the Waterfowl Advisory Committee is an Ad Hoc Committee of the DNR Board (not a committee mandated by statute). As such, specialized tags from the Department of Motor Vehicles can not be available to WAC members. McShane suggested perhaps an identifiable alternative be considered such as some type of tag for the front of the vehicle or some type of clothing.

McShane further asked members for their support of DNR as a whole during this legislative year.

Carmichael announced WFF staff changes include the recent retirement of his Assistant Deputy Director, Val Nash. Carmichael also recognized DNR waterfowl biologist Walt Rhodes who will be leaving DNR on February 15, 2008. Rhodes has accepted the position of Pilot Biologist with the FWS.

Committee member Fore inquired about the fee increase in the state duck stamp which Carmichael addressed earlier in the meeting. Carmichael stated the timing for obtaining a stamp fee increase is not good, but that the agency could possibly revisit the issue in the future since it is apparent that a clear majority of waterfowl hunters would support the increase. Fore also inquired about notification to wood duck box program participants when to clean/refurbish their boxes. Carmichael stated DNR could issue a news release regarding this issue at the appropriate time. Derrell Shipes stated a direct mailing is sent to participants in the wood duck box program as well.

Fore also inquired about increasing hunting opportunities on Santee Coastal Reserve. Carmichael stated staff will assess the situation prior to next year's waterfowl season. Carmichael further stated there is a new manager at SCR who has been through only one season and the manager is facing continuous staff turnover. Carmichael reiterated his pledge to look at all waterfowl management areas on an annual basis to determine if hunting opportunities can be expanded, but emphasized the priority is to maintain the quality of waterfowl hunting on DNR's managed areas.

Fore also requested the Committee set a schedule of meeting dates and locations for the remainder of the year, suggesting the meetings be conducted statewide to allow for more constituency participation. Fore suggested the Committee meet in Columbia when waterfowl season recommendations are discussed and the Committee finalizes its waterfowl season recommendations to submit to the DNR Board for approval. Chair Hiott agreed with Fore's suggestion. Committee member Wilkinson recommended the Committee's next meeting be held at South Island provided WFF staff can make the necessary arrangements. Chair Hiott agreed and asked Carmichael to assist with logistics. Committee member Inabinet asked if the Committee would consider meeting at Santee State Park in the future. Chair Hiott reiterated the meetings would be moved around the State to the extent possible.

Fore mentioned enforcement issues/concerns that occurred on the coast (Georgetown County) during waterfowl season. Fore has spoken to various DNR staff members and some Committee members and has decided to address this topic with the Five Rivers Coalition and the DNR Law Enforcement Division. Should he deem it appropriate for the WAC, he will discuss it at the May meeting.

Committee member Sasser stated he had several additions to the 2008-2009 Migratory Bird Regulations brochure relating to FWS refuges. Additionally, he would like to see a

better clarification of sea ducks included in the brochure. Sasser has provided Derrell Shipes his recommendations for consideration for incorporation in the regulation brochure.

Board Chairman McShane asked that the organization planning to address DNR's Law Enforcement Division regarding issues occurring in Georgetown County during waterfowl season (above-mentioned) present specific issues, i.e., incidences that occurred and the date of the incidence, rather than general information. There were no constituency comments.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

May 13, 2008, tentatively to be held at the Tom Yawkey Wildlife Center. Details to follow.